

THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OF REVOLUTION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE  
INFRAPOLITICAL TACTICS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY ASSOCIATION OF THE  
WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN

by

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## ABSTRACT

While many revolutionary, grassroots organizations spring up on the eve of a revolution and disperse shortly thereafter, the women of The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) have been struggling for a revolution for thirty-five years. Much of the literature on Afghan women examines their victimization under repressive cultural and political practices. The stereotypical view of an Afghan woman is a fully veiled, demure creature who has been battered by the men and regimes that govern her country and life. My examination of RAWA seeks to shatter this myopic stereotype, and to recognize these women for more than the token quality of their gender, but for their endurance and prowess as resistance activists. I argue that RAWA's ability to not only survive, but also to thrive, is due to their astute use of *infrapolitics*. That is, RAWA has adapted their political tactics to counteract the particular oppression of each regime they have encountered from 1977 up to today. Such adaptability includes shifting from highly visible political action such as protests to clandestine political action embedded in humanitarian work. RAWA's revolution is one that will be satisfied not by the changing of regimes—they have survived countless—but by a revolution that will be realized when ideologies change and democracy, secularism, social justice and women rights are realized in Afghanistan.

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Thirty-Five Years of Revolution: An Analysis of the Infrapolitical Tactics of the  
Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan

*I don't fear death; I fear remaining silent in the face of injustice...I say to those who would eliminate my voice: I am ready, wherever and whenever you might strike. You can cut down the flower, but nothing can stop the coming of the spring.*

Malalai Joya, 2009

There comes a point, it seems, in every struggle, the weight barring down and the road stretching long, that small changes and reforms no longer sustain hope—when changes to the status quo will only result in a more deformed reality. This is the point when the seeds of revolution are planted in the worn soil of the mind. Perhaps this moment is the moment of resolve for both the individual and collective psyche. This, of course, is not the point in which spontaneous revolts will erupt in the streets. No. Revolutions are delicate things. The soil is exhausted. It has been tilled, torn, and abused many times. The seeds need protection and constant nurturing. But beyond this point are whispers soft as rain. Ideas flow feeding parched minds. People gather. Hidden arbors of discussion, assembly, and organization shelter the seeds of revolution. Once roots have grown deep and leaves spread toward the sun, once revolution begins one expects swift action; vines choke out the old and make way for the new in the blink of the historical eye.

During the Arab Spring of 2011 the world saw such rapid change. Tunisia led to Egypt, Egypt pushed Libya. Within a matter of months each of these countries witnessed the overthrow of decades-old oppressive regimes. However, the struggle for freedom and stability is far from over for the revolutionaries of the Arab Awakening. Just as the story after a revolution does not end with a regime's overthrow, the story before the revolution does not begin with an explosive moment. Resistance often stretches far into the hidden

past of an oppressed people. Can you imagine thirty-five years of resistance? Not thirty-five years of resistance under the cold-calm of a solitary dictator, but thirty-five years of constant invasion and endless war—a struggle against foreign occupations, civil war, warlords, and religious, cultural, and political oppression. This has been the revolution of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA).<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, I examine what has allowed RAWA to survive as an organization for over thirty-five years in war-ravaged Afghanistan. Using James C. Scott's (1990) discursive theory, I explore how RAWA's methods of resistance contribute to their continued existence. To fully understand RAWA's resistance methodology I examine them over four time periods: 1) Soviet influence and occupation, 1977-1989; 2) Jehadi<sup>2</sup> civil war, 1989-1996; 3) Taliban era, 1996-2001; 4) U.S. invasion and Northern Alliance era, 2001-present. I argue that what has led to RAWA's long and successful existence is their ability to shift when necessary, from highly visible forms of political action, such as protests, to more clandestine forms of political action, what Scott (1990) terms *infrapolitics*, embedded in RAWA's humanitarian work. RAWA has also been skilled in using the means of their oppression—cultural norms or political and religious mandates, such as the *burqa*—to help disguise and simultaneously advance their work. Such highly developed resistance tactics build a strong case that the women of Afghanistan are sophisticated political activists, not merely “victims.”

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<sup>1</sup>Like the women of RAWA, I will be referring to RAWA as a collective singular noun.

<sup>2</sup> Because my analysis is a discursive one, keenly aware of the use of language, I will use terminology employed by RAWA to describe actors of Afghanistan's recent history. Rather than describe the various fundamentalist factions fighting the Soviets as *Mujahedeen* (freedom fighters), I will call them *Jehadi* to express the negative connotation expressed by RAWA. I will also use RAWA's translated spelling of Persian words.

## Discourse Theory

The ontology of discourse theory is centered on power relations and the interactions between the dominant and subordinate groups of a society. It holds that the history and experiences of actors within a power-stratified society is foundational. Discourse theory does not simply assume that actors are rational, self-interested beings whose choices can be calculated like a math formula; it acknowledges that human beings are molded by their experience. One's place in society—based on a myriad of factors such as gender, socio-economic status, religion, race, national origin, and beliefs—and how that place is viewed and treated by others has a significant impact on the choices made by individuals. Emotion, such as anger or hatred, can play a more significant role in a dissenter's decision to lash out at the powers that be than calculated rationality and desires for self-gain. This is not to say that human nature, under the lens of discourse theory, is erratic and irrational, but that humans act in ways that are more complex than self-interested calculation including, for example, self-sacrifice. Further, discourse theory engages in interpretive epistemology. That is to say, discourse theory rejects the notion that there is an objective, grand theory of truth; rather truth is the subjective construction of one's position in society and often the means of producing knowledge are controlled by those in power or a privileged position.

Another significant aspect of discourse theory is its emphasis language, hence the term “discourse.” The language that exists between a dominant group and a subordinate group—how it is constructed, by whom, for whom it is intended, and with what purpose—is a central component of the theory. In his theory, as articulated in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), Scott breaks down

the presentation of language and interaction between the dominant and subordinate into three categories: public, official, and the hidden. The *public transcript* is the public performance. Scott uses the image of a performance, complete with actors and stages throughout his work; thus the public transcript is what is said on the stage where actors from both the dominant and subordinate groups interact. As Scott points out, the public transcript can be quite misleading because the dominant and subordinate groups are literally acting and the play is the reaffirmation of the dominant group's power. If one were to base her entire understanding of a society on the public transcript, one would believe that the dominant group held their higher position with ease and little resistance from, and perhaps even the support of, the subordinate group. While this is clearly not the case, as will be explained, one would believe such a farce due to the highly ritualized interactions that take place between the two groups *in public*. There each group upholds the "role" assigned to them by the current power structure: the subordinates will be meek, humble, and respectful in the presence of the dominant group; the dominant in turn will exercise their status by receiving the respect of the subordinates, and if they deem necessary, administering punishment for insubordination. Within the public transcript both groups "tacitly conspire in misrepresentation" (Scott, 1990, p. 2). The subordinates disguise their true feelings toward the dominant out of necessity for survival and the dominant group members put on a show of power to keep that power intact.

There are numerous techniques used by the dominant group to keep up the interaction displayed in the public transcript. The method of *concealment* is the use of deception and propaganda to maintain control of the public transcript and to "conceal" anything that would distract from the image of their authority (Scott, 1990, p. 50).

Similarly, there is an effort by the dominant group members to create an appearance of *unanimity* among their ranks. The aim of unanimity is to keep any dispute or splintering among the elite away from the public stage, lest the subordinates pick up on such weakness and take advantage of it (Scott, 1990, p. 55). Finally, the dominant group members will distort the public discourse to their advantage with the use of *euphemism* and *stigma*. As Scott puts it, “whenever one encounters euphemism in language it is a nearly infallible sign that one has stumbled on a delicate subject” (Scott, 1990, p. 53). The subjugation of one group by another is undoubtedly a delicate subject; therefore the dominant group will use terms such as “pacification” to describe a brutal armed attack, “liberation” for an unwelcome occupation, “collateral damage” to explain the death of innocents, and “honor” to justify horrendous actions. Stigma, on the other hand, is the exact opposite. With stigmatization the dominant group members can label threats to their power—threats that may be considered justified by a suppressed group—as negative and unfavorable (Scott, 1990, p. 55). The common cliché is “one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist.” Unfortunately, false portrayals such as euphemisms and stigmas are written into history as truth via the *official transcript*. The official transcript is the lasting legacy of the public transcript as produced by the dominant group. Often it is portrayed through public events, historical documentation and archives, which have generally been run, written and kept by the dominant. Focusing only on the official transcript provides one with seemingly convincing evidence, “of willing, even enthusiastic complicity” by the subordinate group (Scott, 1990, p. 86).

What both the public and official transcripts obscure is the discourse of subordinates that takes place “off-stage” away from the dominant group. This discourse



is known as the *hidden transcript*. The hidden transcript includes spoken language, action, and practices that take place off of the public stage. It is within the hidden transcript of the subordinate group that a negation of the dominant ideology can be articulated and patterns of resistance formulated (Scott, 1990, pp. 118-119). Scott points out that “the essential point is that a resistant subculture...among subordinates is necessarily a product of mutuality” (1990, p. 119). That is, when individuals feel anger at the dominant group, it is the hidden transcript that takes this “raw” anger and through shared experiences, mutual feelings and discussions of a possible new order forms it into the “cooked” indignation of the subordinates as a whole (or at least a faction of them). It is the hidden transcript, “the discursive practices offstage [that] *sustain* resistance” (Scott, 1990, p. 191, original emphasis).

Articulation within any transcript occurs in what Scott terms the *social site*. The social sites of the hidden transcript of the subordinates are those locations where “unspoken riposte, stifled anger, and bitten tongues created by relations of domination find...full throated expression”; it follows that the hidden transcript will be least hindered when the “control, surveillance and repression of the dominant are unable to reach” (Scott, 1990, p. 120). There are also a range of social sites depending on how closely a certain site is monitored by the dominant. For example, a secure social site for the hidden transcript may not involve any physical separation at all when linguistic codes, gestures and disguises are employed (Scott, 1990, p. 121). Finally, Scott emphasizes that social sites themselves are an “achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power” (Scott, 1990, p. 119).

While the hidden transcript is “produced for a different audience and under different constraints” than the public transcript, there are times when, as a display of resistance, the subordinate groups find ways to interject the hidden discourse onto the public stage (Scott, 1990, p. 140). It is fear of retaliation that restrains the subordinate group from openly expressing the hidden transcript on the public stage, yet “if it is possible to declare the hidden transcript while disguising the identity of the person declaring it, then much of the fear is dissipated” (Scott, 1990, p. 140). Two key methods of doing this are to disguise the message or the messenger. The former case is when the subordinate relaying the message is identifiable, but the message or insubordinate act is ambiguous; the latter case is when the act itself is explicit, but the actor is disguised. Furthermore, disguise can be accomplished in the form of anonymity. One crucial form of anonymity is mass defiance; mobs or crowds are another way of disguising the individual to produce anonymity (Scott, 1990, p. 150). It is important to note that the degree of disguise adopted by the subordinates “to make a successful intrusion into the public transcript will probably increase if the political environment is very threatening and very arbitrary” (Scott, 1990, p. 139). This quasi-public display of ideological resistance by subordinates is “disguised, muted and veiled for safety’s sake”; by recognizing these guises “that the powerless must adopt outside of the safety of the hidden transcript, scholars can, discern a political dialogue with power in the public transcript” (Scott, 1990, pp. 137-138).

The concepts of disguised messages, messengers and anonymity are tied to Scott’s concept of *infrapolitics*. Infrapolitics is political resistance that, “like infrared rays [is]...invisible... [and is] a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of

power” (Scott, 1990, p. 183). Infrapolitics emerge out of necessity—when open resistance would be swiftly and brutally subdued, jeopardizing the entire resistance movement. Infrapolitical acts would be considered by contemporary liberal democracies to be apolitical (see analysis in Sparks, 1997). In the liberal democratic paradigm, the term “political” refers to open and public acts from voting and campaigning to protest and rallies. However, under repressive regimes, such open political action is rarely a viable option. Liberal democratic theories assume that subordinate groups have political rights and channel through which to express grievances.

Infrapolitics is a strategy well suited to those without political rights. Under tyrannical regimes infrapolitics *is* political life. According to Scott, “before the recent development of institutionalized democratic norms, [the] ambiguous realm of political conflict was...*the* site of political discourse” (Scott, 1990, p. 200). Furthermore, as Scott notes “in many respects [infrapolitics] is conducted in more earnest, for higher stakes, and against greater odds than political life in liberal democracies” (Scott, 1990, p. 200). In addition, Scott observes that infrapolitics “extends to...organization” as well as to its substantive actions. The “elementary [organization]...of infrapolitics have an alternative, innocent existence” that lends to their disguise, such as informal networks of kin, neighbors, friends, communities (Scott, 1990, p. 200).

Scott makes it clear that behind every undisguised, open display of resistance is a series of infrapolitical tactics that made open resistance possible. Infrapolitics are the tactics that keep the hidden transcript alive; it is the political “twin-sister” to open resistance, “who shares the same goals, but whose low-profile is better adapted to resisting an opponent who could probably win any open confrontation” (Scott, 1990, p.

184). It keeps up a hidden spirit of resistance and dismisses any notion that the subordinate group accepts the propaganda of their subordination; rather infrapolitics demonstrates that subordinates are prudently surviving and biding their time until the moment is right for open resistance.

### Methods

In my examination RAWA's infrapolitical tactics, I have employed a case study methodology. I selected this method to allow for an in-depth examination of the public, official and hidden transcripts of both the subordinate group (i.e., RAWA) and dominant groups (i.e., the Soviets, Jihadis, Taliban, and the U.S.) involved in the discourse surrounding RAWA. In efforts to be as true to the discourse as possible, I have made an effort to rely on primary evidence as much as possible.

In the age of the internet, gathering evidence on RAWA's hidden transcript took me beyond Scott's definition of the hidden transcript. Much of the RAWA's discourse is expressed as news stories, publications, photographs, songs, poems, mission statements, etc. and is archived on the website ([rawa.org](http://rawa.org)). In addition to RAWA's website, I gathered secondary evidence from two books published on RAWA, all of which contain in-depth interviews: *With All of Our Strength*, by Anne E. Brodsky (2003) and *Meena: Heroine of Afghanistan*, by Melody E. Chavis (2003). Evidence of RAWA's public and official transcripts came from newspaper articles, interviews, quotes, official statements released by the group, and, when possible, recorded dialogue between RAWA and a dominant group.

Evidence for the four dominant groups came in various forms and ranged from non-existent to overwhelming. With these groups, I focus primarily on their public and

official transcripts to try to understand their outward reactions to RAWA and RAWA's response to such action. Unfortunately, without access to Russian-language archives, finding official or public transcripts of the Soviets proved to be nearly impossible. As they never formed a long-lasting cohesive body, official transcripts for the Jehadi factions is lacking, yet quotes from individual leaders and newspaper articles were readily available. For the official transcripts of the Taliban and U.S., I relied on their websites (the official website of the Taliban, who recognize themselves as the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, [shahamat-english.com](http://shahamat-english.com), and the U.S. State Department's website, [state.gov](http://state.gov)). And for public transcripts surround these two dominant groups I drew from the upsurge of news stories, scholarly articles, and interviews beginning in 2000 through today.

### Background

Although Afghanistan's history spans thousands of years, for the study of RAWA it is sufficient to begin in the late 1970s. It was in 1977 that a bright, young university student Meena Keshwa Kamal<sup>3</sup>, along with several other students, founded the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)—the first women-run, women-oriented organization in Afghan history. At the time the “sole purpose and aim [of RAWA] was the advancement and equality of Afghan women” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 43). Their primary method to achieve their goals was women's education. While some Afghan women at this time had access to education, particularly urban elites like the women who founded RAWA, Shaima, a senior member<sup>4</sup> of RAWA explains why their mission was “revolutionary”:

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<sup>3</sup> Keshwa Kamal was an Indian pseudonym used by Meena to travel abroad more easily. Her real last name is kept secret for security reasons.

<sup>4</sup> The term “senior member” is used to refer to a woman who has been with RAWA since its earliest days, rather than age or position within the organization.

At the time [in 1977] women's education was not revolutionary in the sense that [it was] during the Taliban...But we always thought deeper than just giving women education. We thought the purpose was giving women a consciousness—political, social, cultural—giving them that consciousness meant a revolution. (Brodsky, 2003, p. 106)

As turmoil mounted within Afghanistan, and factions vying for control in 1978 eventually led to the Soviet invasion and occupation on December 28, 1979, RAWA realized it could not ignore the gravity of these events. "RAWA believed that the struggle for women's rights could not be separated from national liberation," stated Shaima (Brodsky, 2003, p. 53). If women's liberation was to be achieved, RAWA wanted it to arise from the people through education and an expanded consciousness, not by force through foreign regimes. Thus RAWA added the cause of national liberation to their agenda. Knowing that left-wing communists in Afghanistan only paid lip service to the cause of women's liberation and that right-wing religious fundamentalists would do anything to suppress women, RAWA also took up the causes of democracy and secularism.

On February 4, 1987, RAWA was hit with what would be their greatest test of strength and endurance: their beloved leader, Meena, had disappeared. It was soon discovered that Meena, along with her two body guards, had been assassinated. Reports of who is responsible for the murders vary, but RAWA itself notes, Meena was assassinated "by Afghan agents of the then KGB in connivance with [the] fundamentalist band of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar" ("About RAWA", n.d.). It is difficult to concisely articulate what Meena meant to the women of RAWA. For many members and supporters, who live in self-imposed austerity so resources could be given to RAWA, the only item "that interrupted the starkness of [their] rooms" was an image of Meena

(Brodsky, 2003, p. 27). In reading the few books written on RAWA or their website, it has become apparent to me that Meena's genuine compassion for those she worked for, her passion, endurance, and unwavering commitment inspired many to join and support RAWA. Without her, it would be difficult to continue. Yet, realizing that without RAWA there would be no nonviolent, democratic voice to oppose the Soviets and fundamentalists, the women "carr[ied] on with the ideals [Meena died for]" (Chavis, 2003, p. 157).

### RAWA's Principles

These ideals for which Meena was martyred, include, freedom, secular democracy, and social justice (i.e., women's rights and human rights). I find it best articulate these principles in RAWA's own words:

By FREEDOM we mean political, economic and cultural freedom and independence for our country. By FREEDOM we also mean the right to individual freedoms of expression, belief, congregation, profession and travel, etc.; freedom of the press, freedom to form political parties and unions, freedom to elect and be elected, and all such other inalienable rights of citizens. The FREEDOM that we demands implies a total halt to all forms of inquisitory policing of thought, freedom of terror and torture, and guarantees for the safeguarding of the human dignity of individuals. We further believe that in the context of fundamentalism-ridden Afghanistan, in order to attain the above mentioned freedoms it is first and foremost necessary to put forward the demand for DEMOCRACY, the prime condition for which is secularism, (i.e. the separation of religion from the State). It is only in a secular State where there can be talk of the above mentioned freedoms. All the above freedoms are infringed upon under the pretext of religious injunctions. According to our understanding, it is only under DEMOCRACY that the religious beliefs of the people retain their pristine spiritual value and are not unscrupulously abused to further political ends, and human rights—including freedom of religious belief—can be guaranteed and safeguarded. We believe that conventional democratic political institutions in the absence of SOCIAL JUSTICE are flawed and worthless. We can talk of democracy and democratic institutions in Afghanistan only when the agrarian issue is resolved in the interests of peasants who comprise the absolute majority of the people and factors perpetuating the distance between the rich and the poor are done

away with. Democracy can take roots only when the means for work and gaining an honest livelihood are available for all and are not under the dominance of or in the monopoly of the few; where there is religious freedom; where there is no national or ethnic oppression of minorities, and where the human rights of women as half of the societal corpus are respected. Such are the pillars of SOCIAL JUSTICE, without which democracy would ring hollow.

(“About RAWA”, n.d., original emphasis)

### Organizational Structure

RAWA’s sophisticated organization style—democratic, non-hierarchical, and collectively based—contributes to their ability not only to preach, but to practice these aforementioned principles. It may be asked who can speak on behalf of Afghan women? There has certainly been criticism of RAWA for attempting to do so, yet RAWA’s membership policy makes them quite representative of Afghan women. RAWA only allows Afghan women to be full-fledged members,<sup>5</sup> all others who are interested in helping—men and foreigners—are known as supporters and have limited access to RAWA. RAWA’s membership is also unhindered by education, wealth, location or ethnic identity.<sup>6</sup> Although they do not put great emphasis on exact numbers, it is estimated that RAWA is made up of approximately 2,000 members.

RAWA has seven standing committees; three of these operate in both Pakistan and Afghanistan: education, social (humanitarian), and finance. The three more outwardly-oriented committees operate only in Pakistan: publications, foreign affairs and culture. The only committee that operates solely in Afghanistan is the reports committee, which is responsible for taking videos and photography and writing reports of the crimes

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<sup>5</sup> “Every freedom-loving and honorable compatriot women or girl who has reached the age of 17 can become a member of RAWA by accepting its aims and duties and its organizational regulations and implementing them in practice” (Brodsky, 2002, p. 174).

<sup>6</sup> While RAWA was founded by university educated women from Kabul, now women from any background can become a member and serve in a variety of committee and leadership positions.



against humanity committed by the fundamentalists. RAWA also has a Leadership Council made up of eleven women who are elected every two years with write in ballots submitted by the rest of the membership; the goal was to create a leadership structure that was democratic, collective and as non-hierarchical (Brodsky, 2003). The Leadership Council meets periodically throughout the year (in meeting whose time and location are only known to the eleven members) and communicates via letters, phone calls and email the rest of the time. Their main responsibilities include: overseeing the operation of activities and to write the organization's standpoints, and political and social policy statements, with input from all the members (Brodsky, 2003 pp. 151-159).

For four decades RAWA has been a constant voice for social justice, democracy, secularism, and women's rights. They have endured what few equally long-lasting organizations have—continual war, two foreign invasions, and severe cultural, religious and political restrictions. As my research will show, such endurance is not a product of mere luck or foreign saviors; it is result of a sophisticated organizational structure and the ability to adapt their resistance strategy to which ever regime hold power.

### Oppression and Resistance

In this section I explore the type of restrictions RAWA faced during each of the four time periods: Soviet influence and occupation, Jehadi civil war, Taliban rule and U.S. invasion and Northern Alliance rule. I show the various tactics used by the dominant groups to maintain control of the public transcript as well as their grasp on power. Most importantly, I examine RAWA's shifting infrapolitics in action; that is, how their tactics shifted from highly visible and outward resistance to clandestine, seemingly

apolitical resistance within and across all four time periods. As discussed in the methods section, I do not have the same amount of information for each historical period.

#### Soviet Influence and Occupation (1977-1989)

*...because of its people I love my country  
My people who will rise up to join in protest  
Even after their cities run red with blood and fire...*  
Meena, "The Great Love", date unknown

Before the Moscow-directed coup d'état of April 1978, RAWA's activities were confined to struggle for women's rights and democracy ("About RAWA", n.d.). In this way, RAWA had positioned themselves outside of the dominant left-right ideological debate raging in Afghanistan. As one male RAWA supporter stated, "there was a higher share of women in the left, but the left was all ideological goals and women's rights were instrumental, not an aim. Meanwhile, on the right, women had no place worth mentioning" besides having their honor and dignity "protected" and being ushered away from school and employment back to the home (as quoted in Brodsky, 2003, p. 43). As Mohmand (2012) argues, the Afghan women were treated instrumentally during this period but *both* sides. In advocating for women's rights and democracy, RAWA realized that they would receive hostility from both the left-wing communists and right-wing fundamentalists.

RAWA's early activities, from 1977 until 1979, were minimal and "under the radar." Small, clandestine groups of women organized by Meena met to discuss the organization's principles and to think of ways in which they could aid *all* women, but especially the poor women, of Afghanistan. They began by holding, small, secret literacy classes for illiterate women they knew. At this point, information about RAWA was mainly spread by word of mouth. Soon they began to distribute fliers called *Shabnameh*,

night letters, which were not meant for recruitment, but to spread opposition against the corrupt regime. RAWA had yet to organize openly—there was never a time in Afghanistan that they felt safe to do so. Thus women met in communal bath houses and wore the *burqa*, despite being modern women who did not normally veil themselves,<sup>7</sup> in order to protect their identity. All of these aforementioned tactics—small, seemingly informal and innocent gatherings; the anonymous distribution of the *Shabnameh*; wearing *burqas*; information spread by word of mouth, and literacy classes—all demonstrate sophisticated infrapolitics. RAWA employed these disguise tactics to be able to physically move themselves as well as their hidden transcript through an increasingly hostile public arena.

From April 1978, when pro-Soviet Union *Khalq* party staged a coup against government, to December 1979, when the Soviets invaded, thousands of people, particularly men, intellectuals, and those associated with opposition groups were jailed, tortured and killed. Several members of RAWA were imprisoned and tortured, some up to eight years. “After the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in December 1979, RAWA became directly involved in the *war of resistance*” (“About RAWA”, n.d., original emphasis). RAWA’s involvement in the resistance early on included open resistance, such as marching in student lead protests in Kabul. However, even the act of openly demonstrating was conducted with some level of infrapolitics. RAWA employed the tactic of disguise, by not directly organizing the demonstrations and by *not identifying themselves as RAWA members*; thus, they became anonymous women in a crowd of many. RAWA also directly supported certain factions of mujahedeen by smuggling

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<sup>7</sup>The veil was made optional in 1959 by King Zahir (Chavis, 2003, p. 195).

weapons, aiding fighters on the front line and, in accordance with their original mission, teaching literacy classes to women on the front line as well (Brodsky, 2003, pp. 60-63).

In 1981, RAWA began its influential publication *Payam-e Zan* (Women's Message). *Payam-e Zan* documented the atrocities of the Soviet regime and the fundamentalists, published inspirational poems, political essays, declared RAWA's stance on issues, and reported on the overall condition of Afghanistan and Afghan women. The magazine also acted as an educational tool through which literacy classes and political awareness were cultivated and was an important vehicle for recruitment (Brodsky, 2003).

Due to a worsening security situation—threats, disappearance, arrests, torture—in 1981 and 1982 many RAWA members, including Meena, fled across the border to Pakistan to better continue their operations. By the time they arrived nearly 2 million Afghan refugees had already fled to Pakistan. RAWA eventually settled in the border town of Quetta. In Quetta, RAWA began engaging in more seemingly “apolitical” resistance tactics. RAWA became engaged in what outwardly appeared to be solely humanitarian projects such as a handcraft center that provided vocational training for women and in 1984, two large boarding schools, *Watan* (homeland) schools and in 1986 the *Malalai* Hospital—all of which served the Afghan refugee population. RAWA's smaller projects in Afghanistan, mobile health clinics and small scale income generating projects are clearly infrapolitical. These projects aimed to give women a political and cultural consciousness and sustained hope in the resistance effort. After Meena's death

was made public in August of 1987, RAWA once again began to hold public demonstrations in Pakistan protesting the atrocities in Afghanistan<sup>8</sup> (Brodsky, 2003).

#### Jehadi Civil War (1989-1996)

*Sister, rise up after your freedom,  
Why are you quiet? Rise up because henceforth  
you have to imbibe the blood of tyrannical men*  
Forugh Farrokhzad, "To My Sister", date unknown

Upon the 1989 departure of the Soviet Union power was given to a Soviet backed puppet regime and the Jehadi continued their struggle to take control of the country. On April 28, 1992—a day that RAWA refers to as the “Black Day”—the Jehadi factions took control of Kabul. For the next four years the fundamentalist factions fought each other for political control, igniting a civil war. It was during this time “when many stopped referring to these fighters and party leaders as *Mujahedeen*, freedom fighters, but instead called them Jehadi and warlords” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 99). From 1992-1996 it is estimated that at least 50,000 people were killed and 100,000 wounded in Kabul alone, over half of the city was destroyed, people throughout the country were subjected to robbery, kidnapping, murder and rape (Brodsky, 2003; “Info on Afghanistan”, n.d.).

The reports collected from RAWA from 1992 up through the Taliban era are thorough, graphic and well documented on their website. While “the Jihadis did not officially ban women from school, work or leaving their houses alone...their lawlessness and criminality had the same result” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 100). The robbery, kidnappings, murders, rapes committed by various Jehadi groups—whether in control of a particular region or fighting to control it—forced the Afghan people to resort to begging or selling

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<sup>8</sup> These included February 4, the day of Meena’s death; March 8, International Women’s Day; April 28, “Black Day” the day the Jihadis began bombing Kabul in 1992; December 10, International Human Rights Day; and December 28, the day the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. All events are held annually when possible (“Some RAWA Past Events”, n.d.).

off their children to those better able to support them. Many women, who had lost all of their male relatives, were left with the option of prostituting themselves or allowing their children to starve, and young girls, many of whom were raped by Jehadi forces, committed suicide to maintain their and their family's honor ("Archived Reports", n.d.; Mohmand, 2012).

While they were the dominant group in Afghanistan, the Jehadi factions utilized numerous tactics described by Scott to keep a hold of their power. *Concealment* was used when hiding their atrocious treatment of women. If the Jihadis took responsibility for rapes, kidnappings, and random murders they committed, their claim to legitimacy through Islamic fundamentalism—which upholds the honor of women—would be in question. Even years after their rule, Jehadi factions (i.e., the Northern Alliance) who are now attempting to take power under the current U.S. established government, attempt to uphold their image through concealment and denial of their past wrong doings (Congressional Committee on International Relations, 2001). In addition, other abhorrent acts committed by the Jihadis, such as the destruction of Kabul, were *euphemized* with terms such as "freedom fighting."

Furthermore, *stigmatization* of RAWA was a frequently used by Jehadi factions. Whereas the Soviets targeted RAWA simply for being a resistance organization, the Jehadi factions found numerous ways to explicitly attack RAWA's credibility and reputation. There is a misconception, even today, among many Afghans (and even critics in the West), that RAWA is somehow left-of-center or even communist (see, analyses in, Thurpkaew, 2002; *Burqa Resistance*, 2001 in RAWA in the World Media, 2002 p. 157). At the height of the war of resistance, there appeared to be only two choices for Afghans:

pro-Soviet communist or pro-Mujahedeen, implying the latter equated with being pro-Afghanistan. Since RAWA resisted the notion of fundamentalist Islam espoused by the Jihadis—who for a time were viewed as freedom fighters—they were often branded as pro-Soviet. Another reason for this branding was Meena's husband, Dr. Faiz Ahmed, who founded and worked with an alternative, leftist resistance organization. One RAWA member noted: "The world over women are painted with their husband's opinions" (Chavis, 2003, p. 90). It was difficult for many regular Afghans to believe that a husband and wife could hold differing political opinions and work for different organizations which had separate activities and aims. This difference was easily exploited by RAWA's enemies.

Furthermore, many of the rumors against RAWA arose out sexism. It was impossible for many Afghans to believe that women, without the guidance and patronage of men, could organize and sustain such a strong resistance movement. Other women's organizations that existed during the Soviet era were off-shoots of already established men's organizations;<sup>9</sup> thus a women's organization like RAWA was doomed to be misconstrued as the underlings of other various male-run organizations, whether communist, fundamentalist, or Western.

An incident in Pakistan, in December of 2000, where fighting broke out between RAWA and other women demonstrators and a Jehadi faction, highlights the vast array of contradictory stigmas placed on RAWA. The following are several headlines and quotes from articles that covered the incident:

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<sup>9</sup> For example, the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW), arguably one of the first women's organizations in Afghanistan, was founded in 1965; yet it was not an independent organization like RAWA. DOAW was a branch of the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).

- “the violent supporters of RAWA ransacked the camps of the Jehadi organizations...”
- “RAWA Denies Backing Opposition Against Taliban: ...RAWA defended itself against accusations that it was supporting the opposition Northern Alliance...”
- “Attempting to demolish the Kashmir Freedom Movement, the fundraising camp for Jihadis was set on fire and the Holy Qura’n was destroyed...Thousands of women and children staged [the] rally...the attackers were reported to be supporters of the Northern Alliance”
- “Violence by Westernized Women in Capital”
- “Demonstrators were the agents of the US”  
(RAWA, 2000)

The shift in regime led to a shift in RAWA’s infrapolitical tactics and mission.

“After the fall of the puppet government and the invasion of the fundamentalists bands into Kabul, RAWA focused more...on women's rights, human rights and exposition of the fundamentalists barbaric actions” (“Social Activities”, n.d.). RAWA describes their activities in Afghanistan (during the Jehadi rule, as well as today) in these terms:

Our work inside Afghanistan consists mainly of support to female victims of war and atrocities committed by belligerent groups. Our workers contact families and particularly women who either themselves or their family members have been victimized by the fundamentalists. Highlighting their misadventures via reports published in Women's Message [*Payam-e Zan*], alerting international sentinels of human rights such as Amnesty International and similar organizations to human rights violations against women. (“Social Activities”, n.d.)

During this time RAWA retreated away from the more open resistance, such as demonstrations, they employed for a time under the Soviet occupation, and began to use infrapolitical methods in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This shift back to small scale, humanitarian projects was also promoted by a lack of resources. After the Soviets had left “international sources of funding for Afghan refugees shrunk until RAWA could no longer even sustain the cost of Malalai Hospital...RAWA shifted its medical aid back to small clinics” (Chavis, 2003, p. 161). In Afghanistan small, often mobile clinics were



founded and clandestine literature courses for women were taught by RAWA members. In Pakistan RAWA continued to help Afghan refugees by setting up schools and medical clinics. RAWA also continued the struggle of education. They tried to attract and teach as many young orphans as possible, yet RAWA was competing against well-funded fundamentalist *madrassas*, which instilled in young boys the principles of fundamentalist Islam (Chavis, 2003). The evidence suggests that this time RAWA kept a low profile in Afghanistan. There is very little written in any of the books about RAWA and on RAWA's own website about their activities during this time.

#### Taliban (1996-2001)

*They made me invisible, shrouded and non-being  
A shadow, no existence, made silent and unseeing  
Denied of freedom, confined to my cage  
Tell me how to handle my anger and my rage?*  
Zieba Shorish-Shamley, "Look into My World", 1998

By 1996, the Taliban, "a movement made up of Afghan *madrassa*, [fundamentalist Islamic schools in Pakistan], students...under the control of Mullah Mohammad Omar" took control of Kabul and brought an end to the worst of the Jehadi fighting (Brodsky, 2003, p. 101). However, a hell-like reality persisted for the Afghan people under the rule of the Taliban; instead of all-out war waged through rockets and landmines, war was carried out through the implementation of ultra-fundamentalist interpretations of Islamic law. Restrictions against women included being forced to wear the *burqa* in public and being barred from leaving the home without a *mahram* (close male relative), working, attending school, going to the hospital or interacting with men who were not close relatives. The inhumane crimes committed against women, children and men included "harsh and unpredictable physical punishment" for breaking any of the

aforementioned edicts, and the continued kidnapping, raping and murdering women at will (Brodsky, 2003, p. 101).

The Taliban, like their Jehadi predecessors engaged in numerous techniques described by Scott to retain their control over much of Afghanistan. The following are *euphemistic* quotes from various Taliban officials gathered by the U.S. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (2001b):

*It's like having a flower, or a rose. You water it and keep it at home for yourself, to look at it and smell it. It [a woman] is not supposed to be taken out of the house to be smelled.*

Syed Ghaisuddin, Taliban Minister of Education, when asked why women needed to be confined at home, 2001

*If we are to ask Afghan women, their problems have been solved.*

Quadratullah Jamal, Taliban Minister of Culture, 2001

*We have enough problems with the education of men, and in those affairs no one asks us about that.*

Qari Mullah Din Muhammad Hanif, Taliban Minister of Higher Education, 2001

*If a woman wants to work away from her home and with men, then that is not allowed by our religion and our culture. If we force them to do this they may want to commit suicide.*

Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, Taliban Minister of Justice, 2001

*We do not have any immediate plans to give jobs to (women) who have been laid off. But they can find themselves jobs enjoying their free lives.*

Moulvi Wakil Ahmad Mutawakel, Taliban Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2001

Despite their outwardly harsh treatment of women and their euphemistic talking points early on, today the Taliban has seemed to opt for *concealment* of their former treatment of women and restrictions on women's rights as well. In the entirety of the Taliban's website (on which they refer to themselves the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan), there is only one article on women, yet it does not declare the Taliban's

views on women, but, instead, critiques the U.S. government's bombing of women and children (Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 2011). Their silence on their views on and past treatment of women is a telling one. They are *concealing* their views and treatment of women, which they know to be considered harsh even among Afghans, to show themselves in a more favorable light—at least as better than the US.

The Taliban also continued the Jehadi tactic of *stigmatizing* RAWA, as well as oppressing them through *euphemized* Islamic justice. In reference to the previously mentioned December 2000 demonstration in Pakistan, the Taliban's secretary of the Afghan Embassy in Pakistan, Habibullah, was quoted as saying that RAWA was an agent of the Indian intelligence, that RAWA was at the same time supported by Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Masood and that RAWA was also paid by foreigners to chant anti-Taliban slogans. He also went on to say that the Taliban regime had "given all the rights to women in the light of Islam" (as quoted in RAWA, 2000, p. 59).

In response to the Taliban take-over of Kabul RAWA stated:

"under Taliban control, even if the number of rapes and murders perpetrated against women falls, Taliban restrictions—comparable to those from the middle ages—will continue to kill the spirit of our people while depriving them of a humane existence. We consider Taliban more treacherous and ignorant than Jihadis. According to our people, 'Jihadis were killing us with guns and swords but Taliban are killing us with cotton.'" ("Afghan Women", n.d.)

Under the Taliban, RAWA's mission did not drastically change from when the Jihadis were vying for power: "the focus of RAWA's political struggle has been against the fundamentalists' and the ultra-fundamentalist Taliban's criminal policies and atrocities against the people of Afghanistan in general and their incredibly ultra-male-chauvinistic and anti-woman orientation in particular" ("Info on Afghanistan", n.d.).

Likely, while their mission remained the same, their tactics had to retreat further into the infrapolitics. While the Jihadis would boast about the high employment of women during their rule, giving the de facto impression that women were free to move about and attend work, schools and hospitals, the Taliban did not tolerate women's free movement. A woman outside the home automatically garnered unwanted attention. RAWA's tasks became even more difficult under such repression. Yet, RAWA did not stop sending educated women back into Afghanistan to continue their work in schools and medical clinics, as well as to continue their own education. When asked why RAWA sent women to Afghanistan from Pakistan, one student replied,

For the experience of living in Afghanistan. To know the real pain and suffering. So we could experience the underground life under the Taliban...RAWA thought I could teach, take RAWA's message to classes...It was good and useful because I could study and I was able to teach others. (Brodsky, 2003, p. 148)

Disguise of their identities and activities was crucial at this time. As Brodsky notes, in Afghanistan it was crucial that most people not know that a school was run by RAWA. As another RAWA member noted, "If the Taliban caught me inside Afghanistan they would definitely torture and kill me, stone me as a quote-unquote prostitute" (Pollitt, 2000). The threat of physical harm, and stigmatization in addition, made infrapolitical tactics not only prudent, but necessary. However, it should be noted, that fear was not what made RAWA members act "under the radar"; the same RAWA member continued by stating, "But I can do it. I'm ready for anything. Someday we will die but maybe it will be a prouder death than from some natural cause" (Pollitt, 2000).

The bravery of RAWA members was also exemplified, just as it was during the Jehadi civil war, by their clandestine reporting and documentation of the brutal crimes

and punishment carried out against the Afghan people. In 2001, a BBC documentary, *Beneath the Veil*, aired footage of the 1999 public execution of Zarmeena, a mother of seven who had been accused of killing her husband. This footage, which was seen by millions of people around the world, was secretly filmed by RAWA, with the knowledge that if they were caught, they too would be executed (Brodsky, 2003, p. 14).

Finally, one year into the Taliban rule, RAWA initiated one of their most crucial infrapolitical projects. "In the context of a regime that sought to take Afghanistan back centuries in time, RAWA moved technologically in the other direction, creating a website and gaining access to email, and thus nearly instantaneous contact with the rest of the world, for the first time" (Brodsky, 2003, p. 101). RAWA's website has proven to be one of their most innovative and useful social sites.

#### U.S. Occupation and the Northern Alliance (2001-Present)

*My country resists the invaders who bring their own ruin!*  
*My country is tired of injustice and will swallow no more!*  
*My country will never surrender to occupation!*

Meena, "The Great Love", date unknown

When the air raids on Afghanistan began in October 2001, the Western world believed the U.S. and its allies were going to bring peace, democracy and, of course, women's rights to Afghanistan. In November 2001, U.S. stated:

The United States Government, which has been the largest individual national donor to Afghan humanitarian assistance efforts, believes the Taliban's oppression of women must come to an end. The U.S. Government supports a broad-based government representative of all the Afghan people and which includes women in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Only Afghans can determine the future government of their country. And Afghan women should have the opportunity to play a role in that future. (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 2001a)

Furthermore, in the same month, First Lady Laura Bush claimed the U.S.-led intervention led to the emancipation of Afghan women: “a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by al-Qaeda terrorist and the regime that supports it in Afghanistan, the Taliban...the fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (as quoted in Mohmand, 2012). Both of these statements, one from the official transcript and one from the public, aim to give the impression that the U.S. is coming into Afghanistan, not only to fight terrorism, but to fight for and “liberate” Afghan women. Both of these statements condemn the Taliban government, yet they, as well as numerous other official and public transcripts articulated by the U.S. post-September 11<sup>th</sup>, fail to mention the U.S.’s support the equally ruthless Jehadi factions. There is a silence, a *concealment*, of the U.S.’s past role in bring Afghanistan to its current, war-ravaged state. Furthermore, the U.S.’s discourse surrounding Afghan women reeks of savior mentality. While there is talk of having Afghan women “play a role in [Afghanistan’s] future” and the “rights and dignity of [Afghan] women”, there is little talk of partnering with existing women’s organizations and supporting them, rather than guiding their liberation.

It must also be acknowledged, that women’s issues are not separate from the decade long war waging in Afghanistan; if anything, the war—the civilian casualties, the displacement both within the country and those forced to flee—takes a greater toll on women than the lack of rights alone. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find exact, reliable numbers of Afghan civilian deaths and injuries caused by U.S. and allied attacks since the start of the occupation in 2001; this I do not believe is an accident, but one aspect of *concealment* on the part of the U.S.

Despite the harsh conditions that many Afghan women still face, the U.S. is deploying domination tactics in efforts to *conceal* and *euphemize* the situation, and furthermore to *stigmatize* RAWA. As just noted, I was unable to find the number of Afghan civilian deaths from 2001 to the present; estimates span huge ranges, and vary greatly from source to source. In contrast, the number of U.S. troops killed, is readily available information: from October 7, 2001 through May 14, 2012 1,966 U.S. troops died in Afghanistan (Livingston & O'Hanlon, 2012). While some discrepancy is understandable, it appears there is an aspect of *concealment* on the part of the U.S. in not being able to provide somewhat coherent estimates of Afghan civilian casualties. Further evidence of *concealment* is found in the public transcript of the media. It is rare that incidents of a small numbers of Afghan casualties are reported in the U.S. mainstream media, beyond the off-hand mention of a car bomb in this province or that city. Yet, stories on RAWA's streaming news feed (by far the most updated and well maintained portion of rawa.org) report daily incidents of civilian deaths, especially those due to U.S. and coalition air raids and other attacks; these same stories prove difficult to find in any U.S. news sources (see <http://rawa.org/temp/runews/>).

Furthermore, I would argue that within Scott's notion of *concealment* is an aspect of dehumanization. By merely mentioning an incident and not the number of civilians killed, their names, or anything about their lives, the dominant power—the U.S. in this case—is attempting to not only *conceal* their wrong doing, but making the subordinates at home (i.e., U.S. civilians) less critical of their actions and thus maintaining a hold on their dominant position of power. For instance, not a single mainstream media news

source in the U.S. mentioned the names of the 16 civilians massacred in March of this year by Staff Sergeant Robert Bales.<sup>10</sup>

The ways in which the U.S. has *euphemized* the war in Afghanistan are quite obvious. As in most wars of occupation, the terms “liberation”—as with women’s rights in Afghanistan, as previously mentioned—and “collateral damage”—when it comes to civilian deaths” are ubiquitous. While the U.S. has *euphemized* their efforts in Afghanistan, sources in the U.S. first began to *stigmatize* RAWA, once they made it known they would not automatically support an invading regime, and today the U.S. has silenced RAWA’s critical voice in mainstream media. From 2000, with the release of BBC’s *Beneath the Veil*, through September 11, 2011, which turned the world’s gaze on Afghanistan, up until 2002, 2003, RAWA was the “media darling” of the U.S. mainstream media; today, however, RAWA is rarely if ever mentioned in articles regarding Afghan women. Even articles that specifically address Afghan women activists will—perhaps deliberately—leave out any mention of RAWA. Often times an anonymous “activist” will be quoted or a representative of a more moderately spoken organization will be interviewed.

Some media sources in the US have been critical and wary of RAWA’s use of the term “revolutionary” *stigmatizing* it as “radical” and “leftist”. Much of this is a throwback to communist-era red scare tactics and completely ignores RAWA’s definition of the term (defined previously). In fact, RAWA’s use of revolutionary to mean education and awareness of rights for women is a notion that most Westerners support, likely it has been RAWA’s unabashed criticism of US policies in Afghanistan and their

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<sup>10</sup> In their honor the names of the dead and wounded are listed in the appendix (also see: <http://blogs.aljazeera.com/blog/asia/no-one-asked-their-names>).



no-compromise, anti-moderate stance toward fundamentalist that has caused them to be branded as radical leftists or hardly mentioned at all in US media post-2002. RAWA's activities since the U.S.-led invasion have not changed much (as one might believe if women in Afghanistan were truly liberated and free) (see, analyses in, Thurpkaew, 2002; *Burqa Resistance*, 2001 in RAWA in the World Media, 2002 p. 157).

Despite the U.S.'s claim that women's rights would be fully restored a few years into the invasion many scholars and women in Afghanistan find that this is not the case. During a 2011 interview entitled "The Condition of Women Are [sic] Worse", a member of RAWA, Reena, noted the following when asked what she and RAWA thought about the U.S. using women's rights as a pretext to invade:

Well, using women's rights seemed very ridiculous from the very start. We have always said that Bush, that America itself brought back to power, the Northern Alliance warlords. [The Northern Alliance is] never going to be doing something beneficial for women. The conditions of women are worse, as we have seen now....It was very ridiculous that Mr. Bush and Laura Bush wanted to help the Afghan women and people. If they did, they wouldn't have installed these criminals. They wouldn't have given them so much power.... But, [the U.S. is] not really helping [the women, the people] with such fundamentalists in power, as proven after ten years of the occupation, and of the rule of these warlords. (Kolhatkar, 2011)

Early on, RAWA and its supporters could see that life under the U.S.-led occupying forces was going to be little improvement from the Taliban, because it was supporting some of brutal Jehadi factions responsible for countless crimes against the Afghan people from 1992 to 1996. RAWA was one of the only groups to condemn the Interim Authority, a thirty member council headed by Hamid Karzi; they pointed out that members of the Northern Alliance, who are well represented in the interim government, committed some of the most atrocious crimes against women and other Afghan citizens (Reilly, 2002; Brodsky, 2003). Their website bluntly stated:

The US 'War on terrorism' removed the Taliban regime in October 2001, but it has not removed religious fundamentalism which is the main cause of all our miseries. In fact, by reinstalling the warlords in power in Afghanistan, the US administration is replacing one fundamentalist regime with another. The US government and Mr. Karzai mostly rely on Northern Alliance criminal leaders who are as brutal and misogynist as the Taliban. RAWA believes that freedom and democracy can't be donated; it is the duty of the people of a country to fight and achieve these values. Under the US-supported government, the sworn enemies of human rights, democracy and secularism have gripped their claws over our country and attempt to restore their religious fascism on our people." ("About RAWA", n.d)

To RAWA, the Northern Alliance is still an enemy of women's rights and justice in Afghanistan. For instance, in April of 2002 an armed Northern Alliance fighter entered a bookstore where *Payam-e Zan* was being sold, he threatened the shopkeeper and demanded he reveal who brought the magazines (Brodsky, 2003, p. 178).

Sahar Saba, a RAWA representative who served on the foreign affairs committee noted in an interview "People think that everything changed after the Taliban collapsed...most of those who are now in the government...are responsible for violating the very basic rights of women...there is no guarantee of security for women. Even if they say she can go out, they would not because who can guarantee...what will happen?" (Reilly, 2002). In addition to the continued repressive and uncertain policies of the former Jehadi warlords—who it is said are only different from the Taliban because of their western suits—women now face the horrors of open combat again. As Saba noted, "the U.S. bombs are still falling which is a big concern for Afghan women—because they are again the victim" (Reilly, 2002). In fact there are RAWA teachers and students who had stayed in Afghanistan under the Taliban to run the underground schools, yet fled when U.S. bombs began to fall on their neighborhoods and Northern Alliance criminals marched back into the city (Brodsky, 2003, p. 270).

Today, the situation has not improved much for women; in fact the situation may be regressing in many respects. The following excerpt from a Human Rights Watch article describes a few of the improvements to women's situations and many of the setbacks:

Indeed, over the past 10 years there have been significant improvements for Afghan women and girls. Official restrictions ended on access to education, work, and health care. Millions of girls went to school for the first time. Women joined government, won elected office, and became police officers and even soldiers. A new constitution in 2004 guaranteed women equal rights, and a 2009 law made violence against women a crime. Underneath the surface of these changes, however, deep seated problems persist. Women in public life have suffered harassment, threats, and sometimes murder. Forced marriage, underage marriage, and domestic violence are widespread and too widely accepted. About 400 women and girls are imprisoned at present for the "moral crimes" of sex outside of marriage and simply running away from home, often to flee abuse. While education is more accessible, more than half of girls still don't go to school. Every two hours an Afghan woman dies of pregnancy-related causes. (Barr, 2012)

In addition, "a report last fall [2011] from Oxfam found that 87 percent of Afghan women reported experiencing physical, psychological or sexual abuse or forced marriages" (Colson, 2012).

There are countless reports, articles and other pieces of the public transcript surrounding women's condition in Afghanistan; unfortunately many of them document its deterioration (see analyses in Colson, 2012; Mohmand, 2012). Even the official transcript of women's rights in Afghanistan has taken a turn for the worst in recent years. Despite having signed the "Declaration of Essential Rights of Afghan Women"<sup>11</sup> in 2002 (Goodwin, 2002), in early 2012 Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzi endorsed a "code of conduct" for women issued by a council of clerics that endorses some restrictions in

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<sup>11</sup> The Declaration "guarantees equality between men and women, equal protection under the law, equal right to education in all disciplines, freedom of movement, freedom of speech, and political participation" (Goodwin, 2002)

place during the Taliban's rule ("Hamid Karzai backs restrictive code for women", 2012). On the one hand, "It prohibited a traditional practice of giving a girl to another family to resolve a dispute... It spoke against forced marriage. It confirmed women's rights to inherit and own property", on the other hand it stated that "women should not travel without a male chaperone. Women should not mix with men while studying, or working, or in public. Women must wear the Islamic *hijab*. *Women are secondary to men*" (Barr, 2012, emphasis added).

After the U.S. invasion some things improved. While RAWA began their website in 1997, the U.S. invasion and those first couple of years of media attention gained RAWA a large audience and most likely numerous donors as well. All of the major books written on RAWA were published after 2002 (although Anne Brodsky began her work with RAWA in 2000). Such attention and funding gave RAWA the ability to carry out more of their projects: for instance, Malalai Hospital which closed in 1994 due to a lack of financial support, reopened shortly after the U.S. invasion. Also a majority of the publications sent to me by RAWA were published post-2001 and many of the articles on RAWA's website seem to be published after the U.S. invasion as well. This could indicate that reporting became easier after the invasion or RAWA became more Internet savvy at this time.

However, much as remained the same for RAWA. The security situation on Afghanistan, as previously discussed, is still fragile for RAWA, due to the fact that former Jehadi members (such as the Northern Alliance) which RAWA has been highly critical of are the ones in power. Thus RAWA's activities have had to remain infrapolitical. For example, although RAWA has held some events openly in Kabul, such

as presentations for International Women's Day and commemoration on the anniversary of Meena's death ("Some RAWA Past Events", n.d.), security is still a pressing concern and most of their Afghanistan operations—the schools, health clinics, income generating projects—still operate in secret. It is crucial to note that all of photos from public events, such as International Women's Day held in Kabul show functions being carried out inside buildings—within a more secure social site—while photos of same events held in Pakistan show large throngs of women demonstrating outside in public. The evidence shows that the U.S occupation has not improved the ability of RAWA to act openly, that is, as a “normal” organization working for women's rights.

#### Discussion: Shifting Infrapolitics

Infrapolitics emerge out of necessity—when open resistance would be swiftly and brutally subdued, jeopardizing the entire resistance movement. In order to keep such resistance alive RAWA and other subordinate groups disguise their resistance to the point that it may not seem to outsiders like dissent. A disguised message—a mumble under one's breath in the presence of an elite or a obscure piece of writing—or a disguised messenger—a women under a *burqa*—may never be noticed in the public transcript or recorded in the official transcript, but this does not in any way diminish the fact that such an act is an act of deliberate resistance. Even a disguised act is still an act that takes courage and dignity; according to Scott “dignity is at once a very private and a very public attribute” (1990, p. 113).

Based on the aforementioned evidence I have organized my discussion of RAWA's infrapolitics into four main tactics: 1) their gathering together and taking action within the hidden transcript; 2) their humanitarian projects, that while appearing to

be apolitical to many, are actually infused with an acute political consciousness; 3) their employment of disguise tactics such as wearing *burqas* for anonymity, using certain fundamentalist-mandated oppression to stay inconspicuous; 4) and finally their organizational style and structure. *What is exceptionable about RAWA is their ability to oscillate between the first two tactics depending on the political climate and to incorporate the latter two into all of their work.* I believe it is this unique formula that has allowed RAWA to thrive for the last thirty-five years.

#### From Hidden to Public and Back Again

In this section I argue that RAWA has the prudent ability to shift between the first two infrapolitical methods. As Scott notes “the discursive practices off stage sustain resistance...” (1990, p. 191). This is especially true for RAWA. RAWA began as an organization created within the hidden transcript. Nearly all meetings and literacy classes, to this day, within Afghanistan are held off the public stage and in secrecy. If it were not for the concealed and secure social sites RAWA constructed—both physically and through their website—there is little chance that RAWA as an organization would have survived. The intimacy and safety created for members not only provided security, but produced a social site in which common experiences could be aired and comfort given such that individual women would know that they are not alone, that they are part of a community of women who understand their experiences in a war-torn country under women-oppressive regimes. A space filled with the aforementioned discourse is what Scott is referring to when says discursive practices off stage sustain resistance. While women are often isolated from anyone who is not part of their family in Afghanistan, the spaces created by RAWA brought women into a place where grievances

could be aired and resistance discussed. Such sites are where raw anger becomes cooked indignation. In this case indignation is a sort of awareness, a consciousness. As RAWA members put it, they were giving women a consciousness, a political consciousness that made women aware of their rights; a cultural consciousness that showed women that their neither culture nor their religion were *necessarily* tools of oppression; and finally, a consciousness of education that gave women confidence in their own abilities (see Brodsky, 2003, pp. 105-116). Shaima a senior member of RAWA discussed what education meant for Afghan women:

The first important issue was to educate women. From the first days we learned that they suffered in that way because a lack of education. If not educated...then they aren't able to change anything in their lives...[Also] from the very first days we talked about...that we couldn't limit [education] to just literacy classes; that would not bring the change that we wanted nor the consciousness. School education was not enough. (Brodsky, 2002, pp. 44-45)

RAWA were experts in maintaining a social site to foster their hidden transcript which was propagated through the education of hundreds of women, as well as young girls and boys.

From the clandestine social site that hid their resistance and conscious building discourse, RAWA easily moved into their more outward, yet equally disguised tactic of humanitarian projects. According to Scott, "so long as we confine our concept of the political to activity that is openly declared we are driven to...miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt" (Scott, 1990, p. 199). One of RAWA's most meaningful resistance tactics, which lies in the terrain between quiescence and revolt, is their humanitarian projects. Education, as noted, has been an essential part of RAWA since its founding. While liberal democratic theorists may not understand education and learning to be overtly political acts, RAWA gives women an education

infused with political consciousness, and giving them such a consciousness is a revolution. Furthermore, many of the children who were raised in RAWA's *Watan* schools, orphanages, and other classes have become dedicated members and supporters themselves. The rest of RAWA's public projects all appear outwardly to be innocent acts of charity for women, free of a political resistance agenda. These include distribution of emergency aid items such as food, blankets, cooking oil etc; medical care, including medical clinics and hospitals, and income generating projects (RAWA, n.d., "RAWA: voice of the voiceless"). Just as the children who were raised and educated by RAWA come to respect or even support RAWA, the same respect and support is hopefully developed in those RAWA aids through their humanitarian services.

To maintain their struggle for resistance, RAWA shifted between these aforementioned tactics: actions with the hidden transcript; seemingly apolitical, humanitarian work; and when circumstances allowed—in Pakistan and early in the Soviet occupation, and at times under the U.S. occupation—RAWA shifts to open resistance performed on the public stage, such as protests, demonstrations, speaking tours, and documentation of human rights abuses through publications and their website. The shifting nature of RAWA's political tactics are apparent to those within the organization.

As Nadia, a senior member of RAWA, observed:

At different points, as a result of many years of war, RAWA had to change its policy. For example, during the Soviets our policy and struggle was along with the rest of the population as part of the resistance. During the fundamentalists this changed: it was not resistance alongside others, but we were a women's organization alone and had to change our struggle and standpoints accordingly. During the Taliban, we didn't see much difference between them and the Jihadis before them; the struggle was the same, but the methods had to change. For example, we increased our home-based schools for girls and for women. But generally we have never had activities in Afghanistan that we wanted—activities that could



be open and expanded enough to each everyone who needs our help Now in this situation there is another period of change.” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 102)

### Infrapolitics in Organization and the Art of Disguise

Here I discuss RAWA’s infrapolitical methods as they are utilized within the organization’s structure and especially through their various disguise tactics. Scott notes that infrapolitics “extends to...organization” as well as to substantive actions.

Furthermore, Scott states, “informal assemblages of market, neighbors, family and community...provide both a *structure* and *cover* for resistance” (1990, p.200). RAWA utilizes infrapolitics in its organization in both ways: structure and cover.

First, RAWA’s *structural* organization is a perfect example of resistance born from and maintained by infrapolitics. While RAWA is a formal organization, it began as and thrives off of tight-knit, informal networks of women—family members, teachers, students, neighbors. As the organization grew and become more sophisticated it maintained a wide-spread, non-hierarchical, community-based structure (Brodsky, 2003).

Second, Afghan culture provided excellent cover for the infrapolitical organization of women. It is not only normal but *expected* that women, typically related through extensive kinship networks, would frequently visit one another in the private of their homes—a perfect place for harboring the hidden transcript. The “elementary [organization]...of infrapolitics [has] an alternative, innocent existence” (Scott, 1990, p. 200), that lends to their disguise; and what could be more innocent than the commonplace Afghan familial gatherings? “Always, the age-old women’s culture of Afghanistan that oppressed also sustained them...RAWA turned every common women’s custom into a tool of liberation” (Chavis, 2003, p. 65). While long lasting gatherings of men may draw

suspicion, it was quite normal for women to gather and chat with family member long periods. And early on, before the rise of the Jihadis women would spend hours at public bath houses where they could talk and exchange resistance literature, again, with little suspicion. Even the Jehadi-imposed practice of having a *mahram* automatically provided RAWA women with security guards and a use for male allies. “Paradoxically, RAWA benefits in some small ways from a culture that undervalues and also underestimates women...The cultural assumptions that dismiss women as inconsequential, against which they struggle...have actually worked in their favor” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 178).

The publication of *Payam-e Zan* is also another interesting use of disguising the messenger, or anonymity. While the messages within the magazine were not at all hidden and their name and logo appeared on the magazine, it still was a tactic of anonymity because individual women were rarely identified by name. In fact the entire entity of RAWA itself—and the women’s discursive practice of referring to it as a collective whole, instead of individual women themselves—is a tactic of anonymity.

One of the most intriguing anonymity tactics—because Afghan women literally don a disguise and veil themselves—is the *burqa*. Donia, a woman whose mother was an early RAWA member, describes a memory of Meena from the days when RAWA still operated in Kabul,

I remember she would wear a *burqa*, at the time all the members of RAWA wore them. For me it was so strange the first time I saw her wearing [a] *burqa* because I knew she hated them...So one day I asked her why she was wearing it and she said “If I don’t wear it I will be recognized and killed.” (Brodsky, 2003, p. 72)

Although most modern and educated women, like Meena, originally rejected the *burqa* as an outdated form of oppression for women, they adopted the attire to carry out their

clandestine work, by hiding their identities and carrying contraband. While wearing a *burqa*, “they were not only anonymous, but they appeared to be their own opposites:” conservative, obedient, traditional, harmless women (Chavis, 2003, p. 66).

Finally, RAWA’s website is another practice in anonymity. Web pages prove to be a curious blending of hidden and public transcripts. While it is available for the entire world to view (unlike a conversation in a truly hidden, private social site, like a home), it is a true reflection of the discourse taking place in the hidden transcript because it is unhindered by the public discourse of the dominant; that is, what RAWA posts on its website is posted independent of (while often in reaction to) the oppression of the dominant group. As previously mentioned, it is one of RAWA’s greatest strengths as a resistance organization and also demonstrates their amazing ability to adapt, not only to the oppression they face, but also to fast paced technological change outside Afghanistan’s borders.

### Theoretical Limitations

Scott’s discourse theory, particularly his notion of infrapolitics, gives a near-perfect framework with which to analyze RAWA’s resistance tactics. While the definition of resistance may be expanding in mainstream political thought, it has still been a long held belief that to resist is to act openly—to march and demonstrate, to revolt, to take up arms. What Scott offers in his description of a hidden transcript—the pre-explosive beginning to open resistance—is a rare look into the type of resistance that does not make it into the history books. In using discourse theory to examine the hidden transcript and infrapolitical tactics of RAWA we come to see actions that may have once been overlooked, as inspiring methods of political resistance.

Scott nicely captures the flow from articulated anger, or grievance at an oppressive situation, to the “cooked” indignation that leads to methodical, prudent action. Furthermore, by examining the most oppressive scenarios imaginable—scenarios where there is no political outlet for grievances—he gives political credibility to the world’s most oppressed people who do not have the luxury of open political expression protected by rights. The women of RAWA are one of those most oppressed groups. In 1997 when their website was first launched, it said “Welcome to the website of the most oppressed women in the world”. To rely only on liberal democratic notions of political resistance would be to miss such a wide range of RAWA’s political resistance strategy. Because of Scott’s concept of infrapolitics, we are able to examine RAWA’s every political move, no matter how disguised.

In many ways, however, Scott’s somewhat narrow definition of infrapolitics failed to fully capture what I believe to be RAWA’s rich infrapolitical tactics. Unlike Scott’s notion of infrapolitics, which specifically argues that infrapolitics are subtle, unorganized, pre-open resistance actions, RAWA’s tactics are not completely pre-open resistance. Scott describes resistance movements that adhere to a very linear framework: discourse within the hidden transcript leads to infrapolitics, which leads to an explosive moment where the hidden transcript is finally expressed in the public, which leads to open resistance. RAWA, in contrast, fluidly moves between discussions within the hidden transcripts to humanitarian projects to public demonstrations.

Furthermore, Scott never examined examples of formal organization. He limited his analysis to pre-organizational cases, which was problematic for me in examining a group such as RAWA which has continued to utilize the hidden transcript, infrapolitical

tactics and methods of disguise, despite being formally organized. Scott's argument for infrapolitics within both hidden and public transcripts, climaxes with his explanation of that explosive hidden-meets-public transcript moment. For an organization like RAWA that cannot trace its resistance to a singular "explosive moment," Scott's framework can be somewhat limited. Also it should be noted that Scott's work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, was published in 1990, well before the age of the internet. This explains why RAWA's use of a publicly exposed hidden transcript in their website, was unfathomable to Scott. Overall, Scott's work provided a framework that made all of RAWA's resistance tactics politically relevant, and RAWA's ability to shift between open and disguised resistance, their humanitarian projects, and organization style add layers of depth to Scott's original analysis.

### Conclusion

Revolution is a delicate thing. It grows in the hidden away spaces of oppressed groups. As feelings of anger, frustration, hopelessness fester, resistance is cultivated, indignation burns and revolution takes root. Prudence and cunning, patience and disguise are principles that keep the revolution of oppressed people alive. Without legitimate channels to express their indignation, those who foster revolution in these hidden places run a greater risk and struggle against greater odds, yet they have so much more to gain.

The revolution being cultivated by RAWA has been thirty-five years in the making. This is not a revolution that will overthrow one ideological regime and replace it with another. No, RAWA's revolution seeks, through incremental, steadfast action lasting change that will give women not only security and peace of mind, but the status of human being—not to be "liberated", "honored", or "taken care of"—but as fully

educated, equal and able to make decision about their own lives, and about their country as well.

During their thirty-five year history RAWA faced four major regimes that all engaged in domination tactics to keep RAWA from achieving its goals. These four regimes were the Soviets, the Jihadis, the Taliban, and the U.S./Northern Alliance. These four regimes made use of the following tactics in efforts to keep a hold of power: *concealment* of any cracks in their display of control or news that would discredit them, *euphemism* in describing their own actions and *stigmatization* of RAWA.

To cope with harsh oppression RAWA, in both hidden and public social sites utilized disguise and anonymity as part of their infrapolitical strategy. RAWA's tactics are infrapolitical in that they do not always appear to be "normal" politics, and they rarely occur out in the open. RAWA applied infrapolitics in the following four ways: 1) in gathering together and acting the hidden transcript; 2) through seemingly apolitical humanitarian projects, 3) by employing disguise tactics such as wearing *burqas* for anonymity, using certain fundamentalist-mandated oppression; 4) and through their organizational style and structure. However, what makes RAWA's strategy unique is their ability shift between the first two tactics and to incorporate the latter two into all of their work.

There is a reason why in 1977 a twenty year old girl, bright and dark eyed, chose the word "revolutionary", as I read her story and the story of the women of RAWA I know why. They saw beyond the horizon into a tomorrow where women of their country would need the hope of a sapling revolution to stay alive.

## Appendix

### “No One Asked Their Names”

A list of the dead and wounded victims of the March 11, 2012 massacre in Kandahar, Afghanistan.

#### The dead:

Mohamed Dawood *son of* Abdullah

Khudaydad *son of* Mohamed Juma

Nazar Mohamed

Payendo

Robeena

Shatarina *daughter of* Sultan Mohamed

Zahra *daughter of* Abdul Hamid

Nazia *daughter of* Dost Mohamed

Masooma *daughter of* Mohamed Wazir

Farida *daughter of* Mohamed Wazir

Palwasha *daughter of* Mohamed Wazir

Nabia *daughter of* Mohamed Wazir

Esmatullah *daughter of* Mohamed Wazir

Faizullah *son of* Mohamed Wazir

Essa Mohamed *son of* Mohamed Hussain

Akhtar Mohamed *son of* Murrad Ali

#### The wounded:

Haji Mohamed Naim *son of* Haji Sakhawat

Mohamed Sediq *son of* Mohamed Naim

Parween

Rafiullah

Zardana

Zulheja<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> (“No one asked their names”, 2012)

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